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Teachers' Perceptions of the Role of Artificial Intelligence in Reducing EFL Students' Anxiety at Salahaddin University/Erbil

A B S T R A C T

This study aims to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of the role of artificial intelligence in reducing EFL students' language learning anxiety at Salahaddin University. The study is an exploratory endeavor; employing a qualitative research approach. A semi-structured interview has been administered for collecting data. Fifteen EFL teachers (7 females and 8 male) from three different colleges (College of Basic Education, College of Education and College of Education-Shaqlawa) at Salahaddin University constituted the sample of the study. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis using MAXQDA software. The results revealed that ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot are the most popular apps. These can assist students in learning a new language with less stress by providing safe spaces and low-pressure practice opportunities. In contrast, serious issues with over-reliance on artificial intelligence emerged, such as possible negative effects on growth of critical thinking skills, the deterioration of creativity, and passive learning behaviors, the study further showed that teachers are generally positive about using artificial intelligence in the classroom, believing that artificial intelligence should be used as a supplement, not as replacement. Finally, institutional barriers such as the lack of adequate training, insufficient technological infrastructure, and the absence of clear policies were identified as major challenges that hinder the effective integration of artificial intelligence tools.

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أراء المعلمين حول دور الذكاء الاصطناعي في تقليل قلق طلبة دارسي اللغة الانجليزية لغة اجنبية في

جامعة صلاح الدين/أربيل

صبرية قادر محمود/ وزارة التربية /إعدادية قلاتسور للبنات

روژگار جلال خضر/ كلية التربية الأساسية، جامعة صلاح الدين

الخلاصة:

الغرض من هذا البحث العلمي هو دراسة آراء مدرّسي اللغة الإنكليزية -لغة أجنبية- حول دور الذكاء الاصطناعي في التقليل من القلق من تعلّم اللغات لدى طلاب قسم اللغة الإنكليزية كلغة أجنبية في جامعة صلاح الدين -أربيل. يعتبر هذه الدراسة محاولة بحثية تتبعية واستقرائية، وقد اتّبع في ذلك المنهج التّوعوي، حيث استخدم مقابلات شبه منظّمة لجمع المعلومات والبيانات الضّروريّة، فعين البحث لذلك خمسة عشر مدرّساً للغة الإنكليزية سبعة منهم إناث وثمانية منهم ذكور من كليّات ثلاث متنوّعة : (كلية التربية الأساس، وكلية التربية، وكلية التربية -شقلاوة) في جامعة صلاح الدين-أربيل كنماذج حيّة لهذه الدراسة. أجري لهذه البيانات تحليل موضوعي عن طريق سوفت وير من نوع MAXQDA. وقد أظهرت النتائج أن برامج ChatGPT ، Grammarly ، و QuillBot من أشهر أنواع البرامج التي تستطيع أن تساعد الطّلاب والباحثين لتعلّم لغات أخرى غير لغة الأمّ وبجهد وضغط أقلّ عن طريق توفير مكان آمن، وكذلك توفير فرصة التّدريب على تعلّم اللغة بسعادة وهناء. كما ظهر في المقابل أنّ هناك مشاكل جدية وحقيقية من جرّاء الاعتماد الكليّ والكثير على الذكاء الاصطناعي في تعلّم اللغات، مثل التّأثيرات السلبية على تنمية المهارات للتّفكير الناقد، وكذلك تأثيره على زوال وعدم بقاء الأفكار الإبداعية، وعلى اعتياد التعلّم غير الفعّال. كما أظهرت الدراسة أنّ الأساتذة بشكل عام لهم منظور إيجابي تجاه استعمال الذكاء الاصطناعي في الصّفوف والقاعات الدّراسية، وأنهم يعتقدون أنّ الذكاء الاصطناعي ينبغي أن يستخدم كوسيلة تكميلية، لا كبديل للتّعليم التقليدي. وفي الختام ظهر أنّ المعوّقات الأساسيّة الثابتة مثل قلّة التّدريب والممارسة غير الكافية، وكذلك قلّة البنية التحتية للتكنولوجيا، وعدم وجود سياسة واضحة أمام استخدام الذكاء الاصطناعي من أهمّ المعوّقات التي عيّنت أمام توحيد مؤثر لأجهزة وآلات الذكاء الاصطناعي. الكلمات الرئيسية والمفتاحية: الذكاء الاصطناعي، القلق، آراء المعلمين، دور الذكاء الاصطناعي

1. Introduction

The incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) technologies within learning environments has become a revolutionary force in modern pedagogy, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching (Godwin-Jones, 2022). Since education institutions across the globe are faced with the challenge of improving learning results and overcoming psychological obstacles to acquiring a language by learners, AI-based instruments have attracted significant interest for their capacity to develop improved and better-fitting learning environments (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2019; Ahmad et al., 2022). Among the most important psychological obstacles for EFL learners is language learning anxiety, a truth that has been

widely attested to as a major hindrance to successful second language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Foreign language learning anxiety, defined as fear, tension, and anxiety limited to foreign language learning situations, occurs in a significant percentage of EFL students and can have the ability to substantially interfere with their performance and motivation (Dewaele, 2017; Teimouri et al., 2019). This multifaceted construct is made up of numerous distinct dimensions, including communication apprehension, fear of negative assessment, and test anxiety, all of which are confirmatory significant barriers to successful language learning (Horwitz et al., 1986; Liu & Jackson, 2008). High incidence and effect of such anxiety have led teachers and researchers to try new methods against these psychological problems and build more nurturing learning environments (Botes et al., 2020).

The incorporation of AI technology in the education system has created new avenues for language learning anxiety to be addressed by non-judgmental, adaptive, and personalized learning processes (Fryer et al., 2020; Dizon & Tang, 2019). AI applications such as intelligent tutoring systems, conversational agents, and automated feedback technologies possess certain features which are likely to minimize stress and pressure that would otherwise be the lot of conventional language learning environments (Kessler, 2018). These technologies can give immediate personalized feedback without fear of being criticized by humans, provide practice with repetition unlimited in number, and adjust to people's learning speed and needs (Chapelle & Sauro, 2017; Zhai & Wibowo, 2023).

However, the use of AI technology in EFL teaching creates serious concerns regarding its long-term influence on independent learning and development of competence among learners (Warschauer & Ware, 2022; Pegrum, 2023). Although these technologies are able to efficiently mitigate temporary states of anxiety, it has been questioned whether they will foster dependency, constrain genuine human-to-human contact, and even destabilize critical thinking and active learning capacity (Pokrivcakova, 2019). The equilibrium between utilizing AI's stress-reducing advantage and ensuring that students are the agents in their learning process is an important aspect to consider for educational practitioners as well as policymakers (Hew et al., 2023; Luckin & Cukurova, 2019).

In Iraq, regarding the context of high education, especially for Salahaddin University, teachers' beliefs towards AI integration are crucial in guaranteeing

effective implementation and even policy-making. Teachers are also some of the most important stakeholders within the educational framework, and their attitudes, views, and experiences play an important role in ensuring the successful application and utilization of technological innovations in classrooms (Vongkulluksn et al., 2018). Such findings and insights can be helpful to determine the possible advantages and disadvantages of AI applications in overcoming EFL students' anxiety while maintaining pedagogic goals (Moorhouse & Kohnke, 2021; Chai et al., 2021).

Anxiety is a big problem for EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students all over the world. Scholars like Ewald (2007) and MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) claim that language anxiety is a strong feeling of nervousness that can make it hard for a student to do well.

As an English teacher with nine years of teaching experience, I observed this issue among my students while trying to learn English and express themselves in that language. As it was stated by (Oda 2013), Iraqi university EFL students experience high level of anxiety which creates potential problems in the process of learning English as a foreign language. This anxiety often hinders students' ability to perform effectively, leading to lower language acquisition rates, reduced classroom participation, and overall academic performance. Traditional methods of addressing EFL students' anxiety, such as counseling and supportive learning environments, have shown limited effectiveness due to their generalized nature and the subjective experience of anxiety

EFL students at Salahaddin University aren't excluded in facing significant anxiety, which negatively impacts their language learning process. Despite the increasing integration of AI tools in education, there is limited research on how these tools are perceived by students specifically in the context of reducing anxiety. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the perceptions of EFL teachers regarding the role of AI in alleviating their language learning anxiety, providing insights that could inform the development of more effective educational strategies.

The objective of this research is to investigate and examine EFL teachers' perception at Salahaddin University toward implementing AI-involving technology with the aim of establishing the contribution of these tools in alleviating language

learning anxiety in EFL learners. In particular, the study aims to explore the teachers' perceptions towards the application of AI tools in the mitigation of anxiety among EFL university students, as well as exploring the what extent to which overdependence on applying AI to alleviate anxiety prevents negative impacts on students' potential growth and active learning ability.

This study answers two basic research questions: First, what are the EFL teachers' perceptions about the use of AI tools in relieving EFL students' anxiety at university level? Second, to what extent does relying on AI for anxiety reduction prevent negative impact on students' potential development and active learning skills? By answering these questions, the study attempts to add significant knowledge to the expanding corpus of research on AI integration in EFL instruction and offer useful and practical suggestions to teachers, administrators, and legislators who wish to maximize the use of technology in language learning environments.

This study is crucial since it has the ability to offer evidence-based recommendations on the application of AI to in the process of EFL instruction, particularly in responding to the age-old problem of language learning anxiety. Through the lenses of instructors, this study aims to address the gap between theoretical recognition of the potential excellences of AI and issues of implementation, thus leading to better and more efficient language instruction with technology.

2. Theoretical Background and Literature Review

2.1. Artificial Intelligence

The idea of "Artificial Intelligence" was first proposed by John McCarthy in a small workshop hosted in Dartmouth College in the summer of 1956, drawing well-known attendees like Claude Shannon (Cope et al., 2022). That was a significant turning point in the development of artificial intelligence as a field of study. It was defined as "making a machine behave in ways that would be called intelligent if a human were so behaving," (McCarthy et al., 1955, p12). Since different writers have offered their own definitions of the topic of artificial intelligence over time, it is difficult to find one singular definition. Most people agree that artificial intelligence is the intelligence machines show instead of human intelligence. AI, according to Tucci (2021), is the imitation of human cognitive

processes by machines, especially computers systems. Al-Shawkah (2017) also characterizes artificial intelligence as the transfer of intelligent capacities to computers so allowing systems to carry out tasks to resemble human behavior. Moreover, artificial intelligence is regarded as an area inside computer and information technology targeted on constructing and developing systems that replicate human intelligence.

The phrase "Artificial intelligence" usually refers to the creation of systems able of intellectual operations, such thinking, understanding meaning, generalizing rules, or learning from past events. Regarding education, artificial intelligence technologies are usually connected with applications for teaching and learning, especially in improving English language instruction. For academic inquiries, for example, AI-driven technologies offer reliable and timely information to support. Moreover, artificial intelligence is very important for language acquisition since it enables students to raise their language abilities and sub-skills (Zhang and Zou, 2020; Xia et al., 2022).

2.2. Foreign Language Anxiety

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) represents a distinct anxiety type specifically associated with language learning contexts, characterized by feelings of tension, apprehension, and worry experienced when learning or using a second language (Horwitz et al., 1986). MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) define FLA as "the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning" (p. 284). This phenomenon significantly impacts EFL learners' academic performance, participation, and overall learning outcomes.

Research identifies three primary components of FLA: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Horwitz et al., 1986). Communication apprehension manifests as reluctance to engage in oral communication, while test anxiety relates to fear of assessment situations. Fear of negative evaluation encompasses concerns about peer and teacher judgement of language performance (Young, 1991). These components often interact, creating complex anxiety patterns that can severely inhibit language acquisition processes.

The debilitating effects of FLA on EFL learning are well-documented, including reduced classroom participation, avoidance behaviors, and impaired cognitive

processing (Aida, 1994). Studies consistently demonstrate negative correlations between FLA levels and language achievement, particularly in speaking skills (Phillips, 1992). Contemporary research explores technological interventions, including AI applications, as potential solutions for anxiety reduction, suggesting that computer-mediated environments may provide less threatening contexts for language practice and development (Chapelle, 2009).

2.3. Previous Studies on the Role of Artificial Intelligence

In recent years, a growing body of research has explored the role of artificial intelligence (AI) across diverse educational contexts. These studies have examined AI's potential to reduce anxiety among English as a Foreign Language (Henceforth, EFL) learners, enhance language proficiency, and promote learner autonomy. International research, in particular, offers valuable insights that contribute to the broader discourse on the integration of AI into language learning environments. To frame the discussion and provide a foundation for the current study, the following section presents a comprehensive overview of the key empirical findings in this domain.

First, Tajik (2025) conducted a comparative analysis study on Integrating Alexa's Emotional Intelligence and ChatGPT's language processing for EFL learners' development and anxiety reduction to investigate the function of AI-driven emotional intelligence in lowering EFL learners' anxiety and improving speaking performance. Through a mixed-methods approach, forty Iranian high school students took part, divided consistently between a control group run by ChatGPT 3.5 and an experimental group run by Alexa's emotionally intelligent system. Results revealed Alexa users had noticeably better speak performance and less anxiety than members of the control group. The study emphasizes how well artificial intelligence with real-time emotional feedback controls EFL anxiety.

Similarly, Zhang (2024) have done a study to investigate the effects of Generative AI oral tutoring apps on speaking anxiety among Chinese youth in China through a mixed-methods approach. The results showed that AI oral tutors reduced many forms of anxiety, including those related to communication, situational, oral, listening, and cognitive aspects. Moreover, participants felt more emotionally comfortable and with self-efficacy, which raised their expectations for future performance development. The study also underlined the surprising influence of

emotional support given by GAI oral coaches, which offers good emotional value by means of communication, care, and company. raised students' self-efficacy and offered emotional consolation, so demonstrating the emotional value artificial intelligence can bring outside of the classroom.

Additionally, in a quasi-experimental study on the use of artificial intelligence, Dorgham (2024) wanted to explore how LINE Bot and TalkPal might help students, 67 Egyptian EFL students participated to improve their listening skills and lower listening anxiety. The participants were randomly divided into an experimental group (n=33) and a control group (n=34). The results of using both quantitative and qualitative methods revealed statistically significant increases in listening skills as well as decreases in listening anxiety in the experimental group as compared to the control group. The results confirmed that AI tools not only improved students' performance but also produced a more interesting, flexible, and less demanding learning environment. Therefore, integration of AI in EFL classrooms should be supported.

In the Iraqi context, Tawfeeq (2024) conducted a quasi-experimental study to examine the impact of an artificial intelligence-based electronic program (Lexis Audio Editor) on female university students' ability to master correct letter articulation and improve vocal performance in Quranic recitation. The study involved 33 participants from the Department of Quranic Sciences and Islamic Education at Tikrit University. Results indicated statistically significant improvements in students' vocal skills and articulation precision, with the AI tool fostering greater cognitive engagement and reducing performance-related anxiety. These findings offer valuable insight into how AI-supported learning can improve oral proficiency and emotional comfort in linguistically demanding tasks, which may be extended to EFL learning environments. This study highlights the broader potential of AI applications to support pronunciation, vocal confidence, and learner focus in oral language tasks (Tawfeeq, 2024).

In another large-scale quantitative study, Naseer et al. (2024) aimed to investigate the efficacy of chatbots as conversational partners in helping language acquisition and lowering FLA, included 320 EFL learners. Their eight-week experimental study confirmed improvements in speaking fluency, vocabulary retention, and anxiety reduction, so supporting the theory that artificial intelligence chatbots create low-stress, low-impact settings that improve language learning results.

In the same way, Zheng (2024) conducted a study aimed to investigate the impact of a GenAI-based chatbot (Reading Bot) on foreign language reading anxiety and performance among Chinese secondary school students. A mixed-methods quasi-experimental design was used, including semi-structured interviews and pre-test/post-test measurements. The sample consisted of 84 Grade 7 students from one Chinese secondary school. They were randomly assigned into two whole classes: an experimental group (n = 42) with a chatbot, and a control group (n = 42) with conventional instruction. Foreign language reading attainment and foreign language reading anxiety of the two groups were investigated. The results revealed that chatbot considerably lowered reading anxiety in the experimental group, though no appreciable improvement in reading performance was noted. The study emphasizes how chatbot-assisted learning might help younger, less competent EFL students support language learning and help to lower anxiety.

In Saudi Arabia, Alsager (2024) conducted research aiming to examine the effects of artificial intelligence-specifically ChatGPT-on academic demotivation, FLLA, and learner autonomy among Saudi EFL students. 83 English majors from Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University in Alkharj were involved as participants, who were divided into an experimental group (41 students) using ChatGPT as a learning tool and a control group (42 students) receiving traditional instruction without AI integration. The results revealed that students who used ChatGPT showed notable reduction in anxiety and demotivation, alongside with increased autonomy compared to the control group,

In order to support up these conclusions, Jubier, et.al (2024) conducted a study which aimed to measure the impact of using automated writing evaluation system EditGPT affected learner autonomy and learning anxiety among Omani EFL students. Thirty EFL students between the ages of eighteen and nineteen were randomly split into equal control and experimental groups. Using pre- and post-tests, based on the FLA questionnaire and Learner Autonomy Scale, the findings discovered that the experimental group showed noticeably less anxiety and more autonomy than the control group, so indicating that EditGPT can successfully lower foreign language learning anxiety and support learner autonomy in EFL writing. Turning especially to the influence of artificial intelligence on affective factors, AlTwijri and Alghizzi (2024) conducted a systematic review of twenty-one empirical studies across 2017–2020. They discovered that AI technologies such as

chatbots and intelligent learning platforms improved EFL learners' motivation, engagement, and attitudes, while also contributing to anxiety reduction. Personalized feedback, interactive environments, and autonomous learning were identified as key mechanisms.

In another prominent study on Artificial Intelligence in EFL Speaking and its effects Zhang, et.al. (2024) aimed to investigate how an AI-speaking assistant, Lora, influences Chinese university EFL students' foreign language enjoyment (FLE), FLA, and willingness to communicate (WTC), concentrated on 131 EFL university students divided into experimental and control groups. The results over six weeks show the favorable contribution of AI-speaking assistants in improving language enjoyment and communication willingness while lowering anxiety, so supporting the integration of AI technologies in language education to foster a more supportive and motivating learning environment. The experimental group with an AI-speaking assistant (Lora) saw a decrease in FLA but a significant increase in WTC and FLE.

Meanwhile, Hawanti and Khudoiberdieva (2023) carried out research, The study wanted to find whether using AI-based chatbots more especially, ChatGPT would help to lower students' anxiety in English writing classes. the researchers use a quasi-experimental approach The participants included 73 undergraduate English majors from Universitas Muhammadiyah Purwokerto, Indonesia. Pre- and post-tests assessing communication anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, test anxiety, and classroom anxiety. According to the results, students in the experimental group had notably less post-test anxiety than those in the control group. The findings showed that AI chatbots such as ChatGPT supported independent learning, gave instant feedback, and created a more relaxed environment, so relieving EFL students of writing-related anxiety.

Li and Anila (2023) performed a systematic literature review aimed to systematically examine how AI-powered tools influence student productivity and stress management in educational environments a systematic literature review, they examined 15 peer-reviewed papers released between 2017 and 2023 using PRISMA criteria. The findings of the study highlighted that artificial intelligence can improve personalized learning, automate tasks, and provide emotional support, thus helping to lower stress and anxiety in educational environments.

Earlier research by El Shazly (2021) conducted a case study to examine the effects of AI chatbot applications on English speaking anxiety and performance. The study used a quasi-experimental mixed-methods design using IELTS speaking assessments and the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) among 48 first-year Egyptian university students. The AI tools (Mondly and web chatbots) enhanced speaking performance but showed a minor rise in anxiety, maybe due to inexperience with artificial intelligence technology. This emphasizes that to be more successful in lowering anxiety, AI tools could need emotional adaptation.

Further expanding on the use of AI in language learning, Almaleki (2020) investigated Saudi international students' opinions on AI tools in EFL learning. Using a cross-sectional quantitative, non-experimental, design including 382 participants, the study found that students' perceived usefulness of AI tools and social influences were major predictors of AI adoption in learning environments. This emphasizes how crucial social factors as well as technological efficiency are for promoting the use of artificial intelligence application.

At last, Bao (2019) have done one of the earliest studies on artificial intelligence and foreign language anxiety. Aiming to explore whether daily interactions with AI chatbots could lower FLA and improve speaking ability, her mixed-methods study, which included 40 East Asian employees, showed how regularly interacting with AI chatbots greatly reduced foreign language anxiety and improved IELTS speaking performance.

To sum up, the 2019-2025 empirical studies create an overwhelming consensus on artificial intelligence's effectiveness in reducing foreign language anxiety and improving EFL learners' performance in various linguistic skills. Research have been conducted across various geographical settings such as China, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Egypt, Oman, and Indonesia shows that AI-informed interventions, from affect-aware systems to advanced chatbots, continually decrease anxiety levels while promoting learner autonomy and positive affective outcomes. The convergence of mega-scale distanced quantitative research studies and mixed-methods research reveal the potential of AI to create personalized low-pressure learning environments in real-time feedback loop and adaptive teaching. However, the geographical extent of research so far has a huge shortage in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and even more within the universities like Salahaddin University. This shortage calls for empirical studies based on the country to explore on-the-

ground potentialities of AI deployments within the particular socio-cultural and learning context of Kurdish EFL learners that will benefit regional pedagogical development as well as broader theoretical insight in terms of integrating AI into language education.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research adopted a qualitative research design to examine the role of artificial intelligence in mitigating EFL learners' anxiety. Qualitative research is more suitable in generating thick understanding and knowledge regarding participants' experiences and views in naturalistic contexts (Creswell, 2014). Particularly, an exploratory design was used through the utilization of semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility and richness in data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

3.2. Participants

Fifteen EFL instructors at Salahaddin University took part in the study. Participants were purposefully sampled across three various academic institutions including the College of Basic Education, the College of Education, and the College of Education–Shaqlawa at Salahaddin University-Erbil. Purposeful sampling was adopted to obtain representation of experienced teachers with varying teaching environments, so that the researcher could collect a variety of views pertinent to the research questions (Patton, 2014).

3.3. Data Collection Tools

Data were gathered via face-to-face, semi-structured interviews. The interviews took between 20 to 30 minutes and employed an interview protocol that was open-ended with questions focused on the use of AI in EFL setting, perceived effect on students' anxiety, and experience of classroom. The interviews were recorded with permission and then transcribed. Semi-structured interviews are of the most use in qualitative research as they offer structure without limiting participants to giving information to personally salient topics (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Voluntary participation was made available, and participants were notified of their right to refuse or withdraw from the interview at any time without consequences.

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to make meaning of the qualitative data, following to the process described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis started with initial code generation from the transcripts of the interviews conducted, then categorization, and finally elevation to higher-level themes. To make the coding process possible and to control it in a structured way, MAXQDA software was utilized. This allowed structuring, searching, and refining units of data and provided an open and auditable process of analysis.

3.5. Trustworthiness of the Research

The study adopted numerous well-maintained qualitative methods of validation to maintain the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Member checking was utilized by providing initial interpretations to the participants to ensure they could authenticate the researcher's interpretation to be accurate, a measure strongly recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for maintaining credibility in qualitative research. Moreover, peer debriefing was also done with peers that were acquainted with the subject of research and this helped to make coding more precise and also to dispel potential researcher bias as per usual in qualitative research. To enhance the aid towards transferability of the findings, the research offered thick descriptions and incorporated participant's own words, as Tracy (2010) recommended, to enable the readers to form well-informed judgment on the applicability of the findings in other places.

4. Data Analysis and Results

4.1. The Presentation of Data Analysis and Results

This part provides a full analysis at the fifteen semi-structured interviews that were done with EFL teachers at Salahaddin University. The aim was to explore the teachers' perceptions concerning the use of tools of AI in reducing the anxiety of learning language and assess whether such tools can affect students' progress and skills of active learning. Through using an inductive thematic analysis method, six main themes were found: AI as a Learning Tool, AI's Role in Reducing Anxiety, the Dangers of Relying Too Much on AI, Teachers' Views on AI Integration, the Effects on Students' Development, and Institutional and Practical Barriers. To put things differently, each theme has underlying categories and codes that were improved by carefully categorizing the thoughts, feelings, and real-life instances

that participants provided. The researcher's critical interpretation has been added to the analysis, which is based on what they said in the semi-structured interviews. Table (1) shows the six main themes and related sub-themes, presenting how frequently each was mentioned by teachers interviewed. It also highlights key findings to provide a quick overview before the detailed analysis that follows.

Table (1) Main Themes and Sub-themes with Repetition Percentages (N=15)

| Main Theme | Sub-theme | Number of Participants | Percentage (%) | Key Findings |
|---|------------------------------|------------------------|----------------|---|
| 1. AI as a Learning Tool | Usage Purposes | 11 | 73.3% | Teachers use AI for writing, translating, class preparation, and grammar correction |
| | Student Accessibility | 9 | 60.0% | AI provides safe learning environment for shy/anxious students |
| 2. AI's Role in Reducing Anxiety | Emotional Safety | 15 | 100.0% | All teachers agreed AI helps reduce fear of mistakes and judgment |
| | Low-Pressure Practice | 15 | 100.0% | AI allows unlimited practice without time pressure or criticism |
| 3. Dangers of Relying Too Much on AI | Passive Use | 10 | 66.7% | Students copy-paste without genuine learning effort |
| | Loss of Creativity | 8+ | 53.3%+ | AI usage leads to similar, simplified writing styles |
| 4. Teachers' Views on AI Integration | Support with Caution | 8 | 53.3% | Favor AI as supplementary tool, not replacement |
| | Ethical and Emotional Limits | 4 | 26.7% | AI lacks emotional intelligence and moral guidance |

| Main Theme | Sub-theme | Number of Participants | Percentage (%) | Key Findings |
|--|------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------|--|
| 5. Effects on Students' Development | Critical Thinking and Independence | 13 | 86.7% | Excessive AI use hampers independent thinking |
| | Autonomy Potential | 4 | 26.7% | AI can promote self-sufficiency when properly supervised |
| 6. Institutional and Practical Barriers | Access and Training | 11 | 73.3% | Lack of proper training and digital skills support |

4.2. AI as a Learning Tool

One of the themes that most of the interviewed teachers agreed on in the interviews was that AI tools can be helpful and beneficial in learning English as foreign language. Eleven out of fifteen teachers said that AI related tools or technologies helped them with such specific tasks like writing, translating, class preparations, and fixing grammar.

4.2.1. Usage Purposes

Teachers reported that the used tools of AI for a variety of purposes, including designing lessons and providing students with support for learning. The most common tools that they mentioned while conducting interviews were ChatGPT, Grammarly, QuillBot, and translation sites like DeepL. Most of the teachers highlighted that they used these tools outside the classroom for the purpose of preparing the materials, while the others told their students to use it on their own. As Rezan said,

I use Grammarly and ChatGPT in my classes specifically for methods of research. Thus, students can learn how to paraphrase and compare their own texts with ones that have been generated with AI.

This means that AI can help students progress from relying on models to write and prepare their assignment on their own, especially when it comes to academic writing. However, these benefits depend a lot on how well the program is set up and how knowledgeable students are of how to utilize it ethically.

4.2.2. Student Accessibility

Nine participants reported that AI technologies are easy for students to use, even if they feel shy, don't speak the language well, or are anxious about participating. They emphasized that such AI tools give students a safe place to develop abilities without worrying about being made fun of. As Hakary stated, "I believe AI can give them a chance to learn in private, especially those students who don't talk in the class." This indicates that AI technologies and tools can make the process of learning and teaching so easy, especially for those students who may have social and emotional problems. Furthermore, another point is that providing access alone for them is not enough. That is to say, students should be guided and supported, otherwise they may end up learning alone and miss out working with the others.

4.3. AI's Role in Reducing Anxiety

All fifteen participants agreed and reported that tools of AI can help lower the stress levels of EFL students in different ways. There were two related elements that helped shape this theme: emotional safety and low-pressure practice.

4.3.1. Emotional Safety

All of the interviewed teachers said that AI may help students feel less scared about making mistakes or being evaluated, which are two things that often make students or learners anxious when learning a language. They believed that Students feel safer because it is anonymous and don't judge them. As Omer said, "AI helps them not be afraid of what other people will think of them." This can go with ideas about the theory of "affective filter" in the process of language learning, which explains that students can speak any language better when they are less fearful and more at ease. In contrast, if we look at it more closely, depending too much on this comfort or familiarity can keep the students from getting needed confidence they should have to talk with people in real life.

4.3.2. Low-Pressure Practice

AI also allows students practice as much as they want without feeling rushed or criticized by other people. All of the teachers declared that students often use AI to practice speaking or to go over their writing before submitting it. Therefore, this helps them feel less stressed about doing well. this has been conformed as Chiman noted, “Students aren't stressed because the AI offers them feedback right away and they try again.” This illustrates that AI is like a practice space, which is good to students for getting better at writing and speaking. But another point should be taken into consideration which is that students might not get better at talking to people in real life situations or scenarios if they practice without getting feedback from real people.

4.4. The Dangers of Relying Too Much on AI

Even though AI has its benefits, but at the same time, ten out of fifteen teachers showed their concerns about students depending on it too much. These concerns were put into two different categories which are passive use and the loss of creativity. In the following each of them will be explained in details.

4.4.1. Passive use

Teachers often reported that students used AI to acquire answers or do their homework without genuinely trying to study and learn. They thought that this tendency or bad habit of just copying and pasting was bad for developing and building real skills the need. As stated by Lawand, “The students get used to it... they just copy and paste without thinking.” This highlights a larger issue in education: if AI is applied incorrectly, it can cause students to think more slowly. Moreover, there will be an irony. The irony, is that while AI can make learning more engaging and personalized, if it is not applied wisely, it can also reduce learning to mindless copying.

4.4.2. Loss of Creativity

In addition to making students passive, the interviewed teachers declared that AI might erode their unique concepts and individuality. More than half of the participants said that the usage of AI had caused students' academic and creative writing to start sounding more simplistic and alike. As stated by Raveen, “Sometimes students don't even try to write on their own; they just ask AI, which

kills creativity." From a critical lens, this demonstrates that public and private intuitions (example, universities and schools) need to rethink how they grade and assess students. Instead of just nice, polished work, they should emphasize on unique thinking and deep comprehension. It also shows how important it is to teach students how to utilize AI and digital tools safely.

4.5. Teachers' Views on AI Integration

The interviewed teachers had so many different views on AI. Some of them were highly against employing AI, while others were more open to it. This theme was divided into two groups: support or caution and ethical or emotional bounds.

4.5.1. Support or Caution

Eight teachers were slightly in favor of adopting AI, but they believed it should only be used as an added tool and not as a replacement for traditional teaching methods. They were okay with employing AI, but only in limited circumstances and with defined boundaries. These teachers thought that AI could help with learning, but it shouldn't replace real teaching or talking to students. They wanted to make sure that using AI didn't make teaching worse and that it stayed balanced. This has been reflected in Pakistan's comment as she stated, "AI is really useful, but I still think nothing beats feedback from a teacher." This shows that teachers should assist make clear rules on how to use AI in a responsible way. In other words, this means that teachers who know how to teach in real life should help create the guidelines for AI in colleges. Thus, students may use AI tools and technologies safely and healthy.

4.5.2. Ethical and Emotional Limits

Four of the interviewed teachers made it obvious that AI can't give students the emotional intelligence or moral compass they need for a well-rounded education. They said that empathy is really important, especially for students who often feel anxious in the process of learning. This can be reflected in the words of Qadir, when he says, "AI cannot help you when it comes for encouragement, it is not human" the statement illustrates that a human-centered style of teaching languages puts a lot of value on the teacher's caring, sensitivity, and understanding. From a critical point of view, this raises crucial questions about whether it's okay to use AI when learners are feeling vulnerable or emotionally sensitive, such when they're frightened about speaking a new language. AI can help with some things, but it

doesn't have the emotional depth and personal connection that many students need. In other words, this brings up the moral issue of whether AI should be employed in places where people need warmth and support, or if that would make the learning process worse.

4.6. The Effects on Students' Development

Thirteen of the interviewed teachers discussed the effects of AI on long-term learning, particularly on students' capacity for independent learning, problem-solving, and critical thinking. This theme has been divided into two main parts: one about critical thinking and independence and the other about autonomy (self-learning).

4.6.1. Critical Thinking and Independence

Majority of the Participants frequently stated that excessive use of AI could prevent students from developing original ideas or thinking critically about the subject matter. As Aziz points out, "'Students' critical thinking can be harmed because they merely rely on it without question." The quote makes clear that this is a significant moral and educational challenge. Although AI can provide accurate answers as quickly as possible, it does not assist students in putting in the mental work required for true comprehension and in-depth learning. AI frequently overlooks the important learning process of struggling to solve problems or process ideas. As a result, educators and teachers must design tasks that require students to think critically, consider what they are learning, and integrate ideas in unique ways and design tasks that artificial intelligence cannot perform as well as humans. By doing this, students continue to be actively engaged in their learning process and education rather than relying only on AI to provide them with fast answers.

4.6.2. Autonomy Potential

Regarding the autonomy, only four interviewed teachers, who were a minority, believed AI could help students become more independent if it was properly handled. AI may serve as a good tool doing researches on their own, particularly in situations where resources or tutors are scarce. This view can be articulated by Ababakir, who remarks,

If you supervise the students when they are about to conduct their researches, they can use AI related tools to get enough source on their topic. Thus, they can become more self-sufficient.

This demonstrates that, depending on how it is applied in the educational setting, AI can have both beneficial and detrimental effects. To put things differently, AI has the potential to enhance and support students' learning when applied properly. However, it may make problems for students' learning and independence if it is misused or overused. Therefore, the effect of AI depends on how teachers and institutions decide to include it in their methods of teaching.

4.7. Institutional and Practical Barriers

Eleven of the fifteen interviewed teachers focused on the problems and limitations regarding institutions. The limitations included each of lack of training, the access of internet and policy as the serious impedes for integrating and using AI meaningfully.

4.7.1. Access and Training

Many of the interviewed teachers claimed that because they had not received a good training or assistance from their colleges or universities, they did not feel prepared to include AI into their lessons. In addition to this, they noted that many students lack the digital skills necessary to make meaningful and practical use of AI tools. In other words, this preparation lack on the two sides makes it more difficult to use AI related tools properly in the classroom. Renas expressed a similar perceptive, noting that "Many of them don't even know how to use it properly... we need training." This highlights a larger problem with the educational system: while new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, are being introduced, there is insufficient preparation or support to ensure their continued success. Besides, it indicates that only some students can gain from AI if educational institutions don't offer the right tools and training, and others might fall behind. To put things differently, everyone won't have equal access to AI's benefits if institutions don't provide good support.

5. Discussion

The qualitative findings of this study, which were derived from interviews with fifteen EFL instructors at Salahaddin University, have been interpreted and placed

in context in this section. Two of the research questions and objectives of this study help as the basis for the discussion, which concentrates on how tools of AI can assist EFL students feel less anxious about learning languages and how much dependance on AI may impact student growth and active learning. this discussion makes it clear how this Kurdish university's teachers view the use of AI in the process of learning and teaching by comparing past studies and carefully considering the findings. It also offers fresh perspectives on how AI impacts students' social and emotional learning experiences.

5.1. Perceptions of AI in Reducing Language Learning Anxiety

Most study participants agreed that AI tools significantly reduced students' anxiety related to language learning. According to the findings, two main mechanisms appeared: one is about facilitating low-pressure practice and the other is about offering emotional safety. These findings are in line with earlier research that highlights the emotional advantages of AI technologies, including Tajik (2025) and Zhang (2024). For instance, Tajik's research revealed that Alexa was more effective than ChatGPT regarding anxiety reducing in speaking. On the other hand, Zhang also discovered that tutors of AI-speaking gave Chinese students greater confidence and emotional help. According to this study, artificial intelligence (AI) tools such as ChatGPT and Grammarly are "non-judgmental," providing a safe and secure environment for students to improve their language skills. Participant Teachers noticed that students who were usually quiet or nervous in class became more active and willing to take part when they used tools of AI. This is in line with Alsager's (2024) research, which demonstrated that ChatGPT increased motivation and decreased anxiety in Saudi EFL students. The simple fact that the current results are similar to those of past studies supports the idea that AI tools can help lower the emotional barriers that make it harder for students to learn a new language when they are used correctly. However, it is important to note, that participants in this study did not about reading at all, in contrast to some earlier research (e.g., Zheng, 2024) that discovered notable decreases in reading anxiety with chatbot support. The results show that AI is found more useful for some skills than others, as evidenced by the fact that the majority of the comments concentrated on speaking and writing abilities. More research is needed on this topic, particularly as AI can be used in so many different ways.

5.2. AI as a Learning Tool

The overall sample size was high with eleven of the fifteen interviewees affirming that they viewed the AI tools as aids to learning particularly in areas of grammar correction, vocabulary development and writing improvement. The theme of AI as a learning facilitator was thus well reflected. These findings are similar to Naseer et al. (2024) and Dorgham (2024) studies, which indicated that the EFL learners using AI technologies such as chatbots and LINE Bot achieved better results with speaking fluency, listening skills, and remembering vocabulary.

Moreover, AI was thought to promote student autonomy in this setting, particularly for lower-level students who could use these tools to make up for their shortcomings. Nonetheless, the findings also reveal a range of opinions regarding AI, both favorable and unfavorable. On the one hand, it facilitates easier and more inclusive learning. AI provides students with "a chance to learn in private," as Dr. Hawkar stated. However, there are worries that students may grow excessively depending on it. This finding can go in line with the results of El Shazly (2021) indicating the slight rise of anxiety in students who had no experience with AI tools. That means students feel more comfortable operating with AI when they are familiar with the technology, as well as, when it is introduced to them in a digestible and positive way. The point here is that even though AI can boost students' confidence initially, it won't help them develop true skills over time unless teachers combine it with effective teaching strategies that encourage students to reflect on their own learning and evaluate their own development.

5.3. The Dangers of Relying Too Much on AI

Ten of the teachers interviewed brought attention to the study's most surprising finding, which is the dangers of depending too much on AI. Teachers were worried about students avoiding real learning effort by applying different tools of AI. This is about "copy-paste mentality.", which has been mentioned by one of the participants. This lack of engagement is in line with the worries expressed by Almaleki (2020), who pointed out that while social factors do affect the adoption of AI, if it is used carelessly, it could lead to shallow learning. In the same way, Zhyan's assertion that AI "kills creativity" raises the possibility that it will lessen students' capacity for independent learning, particularly in writing. This study highlights a crucial point, even though a large number of international studies like

(Bao, 2019) praise AI's capacity to enhance performance: the enhancement might be performative rather than transformative. That is to say, they are able to write texts without having grammatical mistakes, but they cannot have a deeper knowledge of the subject or critical perspective of structures. This indicates that EFL teaching approaches are being called for to change from emphasizing only final results to process-based evaluation, where the learning process is just as important as the outcome.

5.4. Human Aspects and the Teacher's Role

The participants also brought up the important issue of AI's ethical and emotional limitations. As it has been noted by Qadir, "AI cannot help you when it comes for encouragement, it is not human." This result can be supported by the findings of AlTwijri and Alghizzi (2024) who stressed the importance of the emotional connection and the customized feedback in the AI-based learning assistance.

Nonetheless, many of the teachers in this study showed a humanist viewpoint in spite of these favorable opinions, stressing the importance of the teacher's role in students' academic and emotional growth. In a critical perceptive, this raises crucial issues regarding the boundary between automation and real care. Artificial intelligence (AI) can simulate empathy, but it cannot take the place of emotional support and comprehension which is provide by the teachers. AI may therefore eliminate the motivation that comes from human interaction, even though it can lessen anxiety by eliminating personal involvement. As a result, institutions must make sure that AI is utilized to supplement human teaching rather than to replace it.

5.5. The Effects on Students' Development

Regarding the fourth research question of the study, a complex picture emerged from the effects of AI on students' active learning abilities and potential development. While nearly the whole teachers interviewed were concerned that the overuse of AI would diminish critical thinking, and four believed that AI might encourage autonomy, especially when incorporated into frameworks with guidance. These opposing viewpoints are in line with studies by each of Jubier et al. (2024) and Hawanti and Khudoiberdieva (2023), which found that when AI was used appropriately, anxiety levels decreased and autonomy rose at the same time.

Here, according to the data, the impact of AI is not clear-cut and varies depending on the teaching environment and the teacher's guidance. As stated by Ababakir,

If you supervise the students when they are about to conduct their researches, they can use AI related tools to get enough source on their topic. Thus, they can become more self-sufficient.

The above finding is in line with Vygotsky's theory of scaffolding, which holds that supported interaction helps students become more independent. Here, the point is that one must cultivate autonomy rather than assume it, and the tools of AI must be included into the curricula with a clear instruction on a critical, ethics, and reflections. Otherwise, using AI won't be helpful for the students.

5.6. Institutional and Practical Barriers

Last but not least, eleven teachers interviewed identified institutional hurdles to successful AI integration, including a lack of training, digital inequality, and a lack of policies. These results confirm those of Li and Anila (2023), who highlighted the necessity of a good professional development at an institution related to learning and teaching. In this study, teachers preferred and demanded resources and workshops to help them and their students use AI tools in a morally and confidently responsible way.

This result draws attention to a significant drawback that is often disregarded in international research. The majority of earlier studies were conducted in areas with adequate resources, but Salahaddin University is situated in an area with potentially inadequate support and technology. This paper contributes to a discussion by showing the influence of system differences and location in technological success. The AI should not be something that is perceived as a universal solution; it needs to be adjusted to the local needs and cultures.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1. Conclusions

The current study aimed to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of the role of artificial intelligence in reducing students' anxiety at Salahaddin University. The results of the study revealed that EFL instructors have positive attitudes towards the use of AI tools as powerful tools to reduce language learning anxiety. All of the participants confessed that AI technology offers emotionally safe contexts where

students can rehearse without judgmental concerns, the most mentioned tools being ChatGPT, Grammarly, and QuillBot.

Findings demonstrated that teachers do recognize AI's ability to offer low-pressure practice situations with instant feedback and many attempts. The study also showed wider fears of heavy dependence on AI as ten out of fifteen respondents pointed out passive learning exercises and loss of creativity as significant dangers. In relation to the AI usage, teachers were optimistically doubtful and stated that they hoped AI would be an assistant instead of a replacement to the traditional teaching methods.

Concerning the effects on student growth and the possibility of active learning, the study's findings showed a complex interrelationship in which pedagogical support and implementation strategy are crucial for AI success. Under careful supervision, AI technology may increase learners' autonomy; however, unguided use may lead to dependence and a decline in critical thinking. Institutional impediments in the shape of poor training, negligible access to internet connectivity, and policy uncertainty were also cited as significant barriers to successful AI implementation.

6.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, some recommendations could be suggested to education stakeholders and potential studies. First, EFL teachers could apply systematic directives for AI usage that emphasize the use of AI tools as supplementary tools rather than as dominating teaching practices. Teachers should receive training courses to help them better grasp the ethical implementation of AI and learn strategies that complement lessening anxiety while promoting critical thinking.

Second, institutions need to incorporate clear AI policies to cover opportunities and threats. The universities need to invest in professional development for teachers, build technological infrastructure, and create means of assessment that discourage dependence on AI and rather encourage it to drive active engagement in learning.

Third, curriculum developers must involve AI literacy as part of the core EFL curricula. This refers to explicitly teaching students how to use AI responsibly, creating activities that combine AI assistance with autonomous thought, and

creating assessments that measure students' ability to critically assess the contents generated by AI.

Lastly, future studies must observe how well various AI tools perform to acquire various language skills and find the best mix of AI help and teacher support. Comparing various methods of employing AI and observing their impact on the anxiety and achievement level of students would provide good ideas for utilizing AI in EFL teaching effectively.

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Appendix (1)

Jury Members

| No | Name of the Jury | Certificate | University | Academic Title | Expertise |
|----|------------------------------|-------------|------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| 1 | Hoshang Farooq | PHD | Silemani | Professor | Linguistics |
| 2 | Asmaa Yahya Qassim | PHD | Duhok | Assist. Professor | Applied linguistics |
| 3 | Bekhal Latif Muhedeen | PHD | Silemani | Assist. Professor | Applied Linguistics |
| 4 | Qismat Muhammad Hussein g | PHD | Salahaddin | Assist. Professor | Applied Linguistics |
| 5 | Dilakhshan Yusif Othman | PHD | Salahaddin | Assist. Professor | Applied Linguistics |
| 6 | Tahsin Hussein Rassul | PHD | Salahaddin | Assist. Professor | Applied Linguistics |
| 7 | Zina Adil Ismail Chaqmaqchee | MA | Soran | Asst. professor | Applied linguistics |
| 8 | Ali Yousif Aziz Soran | PHD | Soran | Lecturer | TESOL / Education |
| 9 | Mahabad Izzadin Muhamaddin | PHD | Soran | Lecturer | Linguistics |